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A STANZA ASCRIBED TO THOMAS GRAY

While a large part of the undeniably genuine writings of Thomas Gray remain unpublished, the ascription to his authorship of anything doubtful, or more than doubtful, even though too slight to be significant, ought not to go unchallenged. "Thoughts and Verse Fragments," published by D. C. Tovey in *Gray and His Friends* (1890), received something like acceptance into the Gray canon when listed by Professor Northup in *A Bibliography of Thomas Gray* (1917), without criticism.¹ One of these fragments almost surely should be rejected.

This fragment² is quoted by Tovey from the notebooks of Mitford. It is a quatrain, a translation of a Latin riddle, extracted by Mitford from Mrs. Piozzi's *British Synonymy* (1794).³ The evidence to connect it with Thomas Gray is contained in Mrs. Piozzi's comment. "I could do nothing with the Riddle itself," she wrote; "Mr. Gray did me the honour to turn it thus." And after quoting the "Gray" translation she continued, "And while the world owes him solid obligations, let him neither be angry nor ashamed that it sees he can trifle to oblige or divert a friend."

No wonder that Tovey remarked: "Mitford quotes the above passage . . . with no suggestion of any difficulty; yet I know of no edition of Piozzi's *Synonymy* earlier than 1794, and Mrs. Piozzi seems to speak of Gray as still living. The explanation perhaps is that some of the materials for her book were put together long before this." Even this explanation he would have found insufficient if he had undertaken to discover the relations between Thomas Gray and Mrs. Piozzi. There is, I think, no evidence to show that she ever as much as met the poet.

The difficulty is easily removed by assuming that the lines quoted were the work, not of Thomas Gray, the poet, but of Robert Gray (1762-1837),⁴ afterward Bishop of Bristol. A portion of her correspondence with him, running from 1798 to 1820, is published

¹ Items 45 and 1506.

² Pp. 271-72.

³ II, 223.

⁴ See *Dictionary National Biography*.

in A. Hayward's *Autobiography, Letters, and Literary Remains of Mrs. Piozzi* (1861).¹ He is properly referred to as *Mr. Gray* in the *Synonymy*, for in 1794 he had not yet received the degree of D.D. The "solid obligations" which the world owed him in 1794 were no doubt his *Key to the Old Testament and Apocrypha* (1790), *Discourses on Various Subjects, Illustrative of the Evidence, Influence, and Doctrines of Christianity* (1793), and *Letters during the Course of a Tour through Germany, Switzerland, and Italy* (1794). That Robert Gray was given to some verse-writing is shown by the fact that he composed two Latin lines, and their translation in an English couplet, which appeared on the sundial at the Piozzi villa at Brynbella.²

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¹ II, 248-75.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 345-47.